

If at first you don't succeed...

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Willingness to Fail as a Key to Success

Successful inventors, designers, engineers, artists, and entrepreneurs know that the keys to success are hard work, sensible risk-taking, taking on challenges, failing, and trying again till you succeed. Thomas Edison once said "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." And "Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time."

Grit

Angela Duckworth developed a "grit" test which asks participants whether they work hard, if they stick to a goal until it's achieved, and how they respond to setbacks – did they stick with things till they mastered them. In all the fields she studied, those with higher grit scores were more successful.

People are more likely to be "gritty" in areas where they are passionate and have a drive to learn more and get better. So Duckworth says "So we also need to help [kids] cultivate their passions. That's as much a part of the equation as hard work and persistence."

The Growth-Based Mindset

As a culture, Americans often talk about "talent" or "intelligence" as *fixed*: something you are either born with or not. ("I'm just bad at math.") Researcher Carol Dweck taught a group of low achieving students a *growth-based* mindset, teaching that intelligence, like a muscle, grows stronger with exercise. As students grew to believe that intelligence was something they could learn, their motivation increased. They worked harder. When they faced difficulty, instead of saying "I'm just not smart enough", they would say that "I need to work harder". Their math scores improved, and continued to improve in the following years. Let's compare a fixed mindset with a growth mindset:

	Fixed Mindset	Growth-Based Mindset
Belief	Intelligence is static. You have it or you don't.	Intelligence develops with effort.
Success	Proving I'm smart or talented.	To push myself and try new things.
Attitude to challenges	I avoid challenges. I only try things I know I can do well.	I embrace challenges. I persist when things get tough.
Response to setbacks	I'm a failure. (identity) I give up.	I failed. (action) I learn from it and move on. I'll try harder next time
Effort	Why bother? It's pointless.	Effort is the key to mastery.
Criticism	Ignore criticism or deflect: "It's not my fault."	Learn from criticism: how can I improve?
I feel good	When it's perfect. When I win.	When I try hard. When I figure something out.
Results	They plateau early. Never reach full potential.	They achieve ever-higher levels of success.

Building Grit and a Growth-Based Mindset

- **Don't praise "Talent"**. If every time your child succeeds at something, you say "wow, you're really smart" or "you're so strong, that implies that if they struggle with something else they're no longer smart, or strong, or worthwhile. (Dweck found that if children were praised for intelligence and the final *product* of their work, they would then start avoiding challenging tasks, choosing only things they knew they could be successful at.)

- **Do praise effort and point out the rewards of hard work.** “Wow, you worked really hard at that, and it looks like it turned out just like you hoped.” Or: “I can see you’re frustrated that it’s not working out like you hoped. But I’m so proud of how hard you’ve been working on it. What else could you try?” (Dweck found that if children were praised for effort – the *process* they had gone through, they’d then choose to take on challenging tasks where they knew they might fail but felt they could learn something important.)
- **Praise what’s in their control, not what’s not.** Instead of “you have such pretty eyes”, say “I like the dress you chose today – it matches your eyes.”
- **Don’t criticize by saying they lack talent.** “You’re always so slow. You’ll just never get to the ball before the other kids.” **Focus on what they have the potential to improve on:** “It seems like you have a hard time out-running people. How can we build your running skills or how can we figure out mental strategies to help you anticipate things so you can get there faster?”
- **Don’t just generically say “good job.”** Give specific information about what was good about it and constructive feedback about what could be better. Specific praise helps them know that you paid attention and you care. Ask them what *they* think they did well, and how it could be better.
- **Don’t ask: did you win?** Do ask: What did you try hard at today? Did you make any mistakes you learned from? Did you ask someone how you could do better next time?

Create the culture

- Create a culture where struggle and risk-taking is valued more than getting the right answer.
- Tell / read / watch stories about successful people where being gritty helped them succeed.
- Let them know that everyone, no matter how talented, runs up against things they can’t do. The ones who succeed are the ones who after they fail, pick themselves up, and persevere.
- Talk about mistakes and failures as normal parts of learning – not reasons to quit.
- Let them see *you* fail and keep trying. Don’t say “I’m just no good at this.” Say “I’m not good at this yet. I need to try harder.”
- Honor them for times when they set goals, face road blocks, and carry on to completion.
- Help them find passions so they have motivation to pursue skill and knowledge. When pursuing passion, work is fun! (Thomas Edison said: “I never did a day’s work in my life. It was all fun.”)
- Try the “hard things challenge”: Each family member chooses something to try. The rules: you can’t quit in the middle and make sure it’s something you want to do so you’re motivated to keep trying. Support each other through frustrations. Cheer on each other’s progress and persistence.

Tinker: Build Things Together

Work together to create something that neither of you knows how to create. Figure it out together!

Come up with an idea for what you want to accomplish. Draw it and plan it. Build it. Test it. Ask each other: what is working? What could be better? Make it better together. Celebrate your successes!

For more info. Look at www.GoodDaysWithKids.com for more details on all these topics. Other sources -

- Can we teach grit? <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/290089998/does-teaching-kids-to-get-gritty-help-them-get-ahead>
- Watch Duckworth’s TED talk on grit: www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_the_key_to_success_grit
- Watch Dweck’s TED talk on mindset: www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve
- “Inverse Power of Praise” from *Nurture Shock*. <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Books/story?id=8433586&singlePage=true>
- How to Nurture a Growth Mindset in Kids: <https://positivepsychology.com/growth-mindset-for-kids/>